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# A Mindful Moral Compass for Twenty-First Century Leadership: *The Noble Eightfold Path*



## Abstract

*Leadership toward a sustainable and morally responsible future is reviewed within the context of the ancient Noble Eightfold Path, a core Buddhist instrument that is used here within a secular scope. Following a brief exploration of its two main concepts, leadership and Buddhism, the article reveals eight elements of the Noble Eightfold Path with illustrations from contemporary leaders who have implemented these practices in their careers. The leaders reviewed are Elon Musk, Muhammad Yunus, Binta Niambi-Brown, Ray Anderson, Millard Fuller, Vandana Shiva and Howard Schultz. Scholars and practitioners are encouraged to consider the Noble Eightfold Path as a mindful moral compass.*

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## Introduction

The expansive reach and accessibility of information in today's world has elevated philosophical concepts from all corners of the world from their historical habitats into global communities. Buddhism, as the foundational philosophy of this paper, for instance, has helped to contribute to advances into the psychology chronicles of both Western and non-Western thinkers in the past, and continues to do so in contemporary times (Hansen, 2007; Riner, 2010; Fulton, 2014). There are many reasons that could be brought forth for this advancement, and one of the more important ones is the need for engaged leadership. Today's employees are looking for leaders that believe in philanthropy and elevate their minds and actions beyond self-interest (Kemavuthanon & Duberley, 2009).

Buddhist teaching is closely related to this view, as it delineates that we attain life's objectives in three tiers: personal advancement (Attatha), the advancement of others (Parattha), and reciprocal advancement (Ubhayattha) (Kemavuthanon & Duberley, 2009). So, could Buddhism, when perceived as a psychological practice, lead to engaged leadership within contemporary leaders? In order to find that out, this paper will link an ancient Buddhist cluster

of eight behaviors to contemporary needs for leaders' practices, thus presenting a useful roadmap to those who might consider this a viable paradigm for their leadership performance from here onward.

This paper first presents a brief overview on leadership, followed by a slightly more extensive overview on Buddhism. This structural sequence was guided by the fact that leadership will be presented in light of a foundational Buddhist concept: the Four Noble Truths, including the Noble Eightfold Path. Once introduced, each element of the Noble Eightfold Path will be briefly presented, followed by a discussion of a contemporary leader that has compellingly displayed this element. Due to the fact that the treads of the eightfold path are not to be seen as sequential but as conjointly, each of the presented leader could easily be discussed at any of the other treads.

### **Leadership: Some Thoughts**

A comparison of the qualities that were considered critical for leaders in the twentieth century with the ones that matter today, exposes some differences. As a result of repeated exposure to major corporate frauds such as Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, HealthSouth, Freddie Mac, American Insurance Group (AIG) and Lehman Brothers, today's workforce members have come to understand that leaders with sheer profit focus and self-serving agendas, but void of concern for the wellbeing of stakeholders, no longer have a place in today's performing entities. The manifestation of the above and many other corporate downfalls served as an epiphanal shift in employees' paradigms. Additionally, the transformation from an industrial economy to an information society has shifted the collective behavioral emphasis to integrity, communication, and flexibility (Robles, 2012). The phenomenon "wealth" has been gradually changing from amassing material or monetary assets to appreciating knowledge and insight: mind over matter (Gilder, 1990).

### **Moral Essentials for Today's Leaders**

While employees are increasingly conveying their preference for flexible, transparent, and honest leaders, there are still many chief executives who prioritize their personal financial growth over the wellbeing of stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined in this paper as all individuals and groups that are affected by the performance of the entity. Johnson (2011) describes the topic of leadership today as one that displays a bright and a dark side. On the bright side, there are those leaders with good intentions who rapidly and massively respond to small and large moral issues. On the dark side, there are still leaders in almost every environment – business, the military, politics, medicine, education or religion – who get involved in ethical scandals. There are some leaders who suffer from a poor reputation and even find themselves facing lawsuits or behind bars, often leaving their former followers (employees or supporters) in dire situations, varying from loss of jobs of livelihood to loss of personal dignity, or even loss of personal safety (Johnson, 2011). Because leaders have the power to influence the lives of those that follow them, they can cause much damage in large circles, especially when we consider that each follower, in turn, has dependents that count on his or her wellbeing. Johnson cites authors such as Palmer, Lipman-Blumen and Kellerman, who point out several shadow sides of leadership and warn for the numerous destructive behaviors that leaders can exert. Trust in leaders has been dwindling in recent decades: a national business ethics study, sponsored by the Hudson Institute and Walker Information found that less than half of the American workforce considers its leaders to be people of high

integrity (Carroll, 2009). As they increase their observations, reading and communication, employees assess their leaders' moral footprint more rapidly today (Marques, 2014). People in leading positions should therefore consider the ethical impacts of their decisions at all times and choose for directions that are ethically sound (Gilbert, 2012).

## **Soft and Hard Skills**

The transmutation in leadership behavioral preferences has brought to the forefront, the discussion of soft and hard skills for leaders. Soft skills encompass behaviors of motivation, empathy, self-regulation, and social skills (Goleman, 2000), and focus more on interpersonal relationships (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht & Lee, 2010). Hard skills, on the other hand, pertain to intelligence, analytical/technical skills, determination, rigor, and vision (Goleman, 2000), and could best be classified as technical or administrative qualities that can be quantified and measured (Dixon et. al., 2010). Leaders should apply both, soft and hard skills, in proper balance in order to combine their astute business behavior with decent interpersonal sensitivity (Marques, 2014).

The rise of soft skills in leadership is important. This is neither a temporary phase that will diminish in a few years, nor a tendency that will be limited to smaller firms or non-profit entities. The call for soft skills in leaders is a global one, which has been proven in studies such as the one from Hind, Wilson and Lenssen (2009), who surveyed workforce members of 11 large European Multinational Corporations and found that these employees considered soft skills imperative to good leadership. Robles (2012) underscored these findings with the results from a study among 57 business executives, who also agreed that integrity and communication were some of the most critical soft skills needed in today's workplaces. As business leaders become more aware of the need to combine hard and soft skills in their approaches, we are gradually entering a stage where Buddhist psychology could find broad reception in contemporary workforces.

## **Buddhism: A Snapshot**

Buddhism has been around for more than 2500 years. The man we came to know as "the Buddha" was named Gautama Siddhartha, and lived from about 563 or 566 B.C.E. to about 486 B.C.E. Most research scholars claim that the place of his birth was what we now know as Lumbini, in Nepal (UNESCO World Heritage Center, 2016), yet, there are some sources that refute this and claim that he was born in India ("*Buddha. Biography,*" 2016; "*Historians generally agree...*," 2016). Siddhartha, who was the son of a tribal king, distanced himself from his affluent background as a young man, and subsequently acquired some valuable insights over the course of his life. The Buddha's insights have been formalized in various "vehicles" or "schools," were passed on through the centuries, and have since spread worldwide. The most commonly known schools, sometimes referred to as "vehicles," are Theravada, also known as the older smaller vehicle, and Mahayana, also known as the larger vehicle. Even though they have some important philosophical differences, the two schools share a number of critical foundational insights and teachings such as suffering, impermanence, no-self, karma, nirvana, dependent origination, mindfulness, and the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path (Marques, 2015).

Buddhism presents a specific worldview and way of living that leads to personal understanding, happiness, and a wholesome development (Johansen & Gopalakrishna,

2006). It can be described as a moral, ethical, value-based, scientific, educational system that serves the purpose of enabling its observers to see things in their true nature, which will, in turn, help them get rid of suffering and attain happiness for themselves and many others. The Buddha is not to be worshipped as a god but revered as an awakened teacher (Johansen & Gopalakrishna).

## **Moral Underpinnings**

According to the Dalai Lama (2005), the highest spiritual ideal in Buddhism is to cultivate compassion for all the living, and contribute toward their welfare as much as possible. With today's global challenges that vary from alterations of food and living species (through DNA manipulations), to diversification and potential misuse of technological possibilities, the Dalai Lama (2005) calls for a collective moral compass that acknowledges the basic goodness of human nature, recognizes the preciousness of life, honors the need and maintenance of balance in nature, and transcends the limitations of religious, cultural, and national boundaries. Implementing such a moral compass can only be done through mindfulness and concentration, which Thich (2010) describes as a moment to moment awareness of our circumstances. Thich (2010) explains that mindfulness makes us aware of the many instances of happiness we otherwise overlook in life.

Buddhism can be perceived in different contexts, such as a social model, a religion, a philosophy, or a psychology. It eludes the query about a higher being, and primarily focuses on the teaching of virtues such as non-harming and the ending of suffering through a series of steps pertaining to our views, intentions, speech, actions, livelihood, efforts, concentration, and mindfulness. These steps form the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the last of the Four Noble Truths. The Noble Eightfold Path will further be discussed in this paper, along with brief ponderings about leaders who potentially meet one or more of the criteria.

## **The Four Noble Truths**

The Four Noble Truths were defined by the Buddha, and became foundational in his post-enlightenment lectures. The Four Noble Truths are, in fact, a sequence of insights:

1. The truth of suffering (suffering exists)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (suffering has a cause)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (suffering can be ended)
4. The truth of the path, the way to liberation from suffering (the path to end suffering)

Suffering, in this context, actually is an insufficient term, because the Buddha intended to encompass much more with the word that he used, which was "Dukkha." Dukkha pertains to more than suffering, pain, or misery. It suggests the foundational unsatisfactory sense we get from existing. It refers to the lack of perfection and the constant struggle and strive that is associated with life (Bodhi, N/A).

### ***Brief Overview of the First Three Noble Truths***

The First Noble Truth establishes the foundation of a reality: suffering exists. In this regard, "suffering" pertains to the entirety of life, and the many instances of anguish it brings, from birth to death, from illness to aging, and from unpleasant experiences to the inability to obtain or hold on to the things we crave (Trungpa, 2009). The Second Noble Truth, which states that suffering has a cause, can be easily understood once we have obtained an understanding of

what the First Noble Truth entails. This Second Noble Truth encompasses the reality of gaining things and losing them again: the recurring manifestations of impermanence, which can cause mourning and oftentimes even a sense of devastation. Because human beings are possessive by nature, we have a drive to obtain and cherish, and the fact that we can only hold anything, even our youth, our health, our loved ones, and even our life, for only a while, causes suffering (Rahula, 1974). We have a tendency to cling to people, places, experiences, wishes, ideas, or mindsets, and this causes suffering (Nyanatiloka, 1970). The Third Noble Truth, suffering can be ended, shines a positive light on the grimness that emanates from the first two: it is possible to become free from suffering. In order to attain this, however, the cause of our suffering has to be terminated, which means that desires and aversions will have to be annihilated. Rahula (1974) describes the state of having released our desires, thus having ended our suffering, as the attainment of nirvana.

The Four Noble Truths can be seen as the essence of the Buddha's teaching (Bodhi, 1994, 2000). The first three Noble Truths, as explained above, are intended as points of understanding, and the fourth, which entails the Noble Eightfold Path, as a practice to be implemented if one chooses to address the issue of suffering. A good way of looking at it is, that the First Truth has to be understood, the Second Truth has to be abandoned, the Third Truth has to be realized, and the Fourth Truth has to be developed (Bodhi, N/A).

### ***The Noble Eightfold Path***

The Fourth Noble Truth provides an actual way to end suffering: The Noble Eightfold Path. This Path encompasses the following practices or insights: Right View; Right Intention; Right Speech; Right Action; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; and Right Concentration. There is no specific sequence in this set of insights, because they are interrelated. However, it might be prudent to start the review of this path with right view for the simple reason that right view enhances the understanding of the first three Noble Truths, while it also augments insight into the importance of this interconnected elements of the Path. In other words, it links the awareness of the initial three Noble Truths to the contents of the Fourth. Yet, that is just one way of perceiving "right view." In fact, the entire scope of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path can be reduced to two essentials, 1, Suffering, and 2, The end of suffering (Gethin, 1998).

When considering the path, it becomes clear that each part is integrated and can serve as a good preparation to the next. For instance, right mindfulness, which can be attained through meditation, leads to right concentration (Gombrich, 1988). In the following section, we will engage in a brief contemplation of each tread of the path and bring this within the realm of leadership, thus attempting to demonstrate how this tread could benefit leaders.

### ***The Noble Eightfold Path as Leadership Compass***

#### **Right View**

As indicated before, "right view" may be considered a good starting point of the path, even though there is no specific requirement to do so. However, when engaging in right view, one can begin with acquiring a deeper understanding of the Four Noble Truths: the fact that we suffer; the reasons why we suffer; and the reality that we can choose to end our suffering. Right view can help us nurture good intentions and keep bad intentions quiescent (Thich, 1998). Right view entails our ability to detect which of our mindsets are constructive and nourish those. It also influences our perception: the way we consider things that happen to

and around us. We have the ability to either maintain a negative view and perceive everything as an offense to the quality of life, or consider matters from a positive angle and distinguish the positive lessons in each experience. Right view adjusts limiting perspectives, and may even lead us to understand that actually, all perspectives are limiting. Thus, right view influences our attitude.

Within the leadership context, Elon Musk could be considered a decent example of a contemporary leader practicing “right view.” Musk has the ability to not only consider the major challenges our world faces, but also actively and devotedly work on finding solutions to these seemingly insurmountable problems.

Musk is not an advocate of incrementalism, but has revolutionary views on redesigning the future. His visions are not years but decades ahead of their time (Vance, 2012). Having started in the dotcom era with some insightful ventures such as Zip2, which he sold to Compaq Computer for more than \$300 million, and X.com, the precursor to PayPal, which he sold to E-Bay for \$1.5 billion, Musk created the financial space to begin realizing bigger and more impactful dreams (Vance, 2012).

As a business leader, Musk actively works on addressing the heavy toll we have thus far taken on our environment and on finding a solution for our ever-growing human population. In regards to the first, his Tesla automobiles that drive on electricity rather than unsustainable and environment contaminating fossil fuels, speak volumes. In regards to the latter, he has been diligently evolving Space Exploration Technologies, known as SpaceX, the first-ever private company to deliver cargo to the Space Station. While the current activities of SpaceX are rather lucrative, Musk focuses on the bigger picture: occupying Mars as humanity’s second home (Vandermeij, 2013).

Having been likened to Steve Jobs more than once, Musk’s most outstanding leadership quality, similar to Jobs, is not invention but vision. Having acquired a design thinking mindset through an early interest in science and history, and holding degrees in physics as well as business (Vandermeij), Musk has developed the critical leadership skill of seeing past the here and now, and responding to needs that are still considered insoluble by most. For that very reason, Musk has been called one of the greatest optimists in history, definitely when considering an optimist within the scope of physicist David Deutsch, who describes optimists as people who believe that “any problem that does not contradict the law of physics can ultimately be solved” (Vandermeij, p. 90).

Musk has determined for himself what a better future for humanity should look like, and he has inspired an entire legion of workers to help him realize this vision. He worked hard on his dream even before there was any external confidence in his vision, and he himself had little or no certainty that he would succeed. In an interview, Musk explained that he considers the California bullet train a setback rather than a sign of progress, because it will move people from Los Angeles to San Francisco at a speed of merely 120 miles per hour, something they can achieve on the freeway by car. He boldly expressed his disappointment in such a project in a leading hub in the US to the California Governor, Jerry Brown, underscoring that we should not focus on the glory of a small group, but on the progress of an entire nation (Musk, 2014).

Musk’s attitude is one of great example to leaders of today: dream big and constructive with no immediate focus on money, as this will ultimately come in with much more abundance when perceived as a consequence than as a primary goal. Musk’s ideas focus on macro



wellbeing, and he has found a way to communicate these ideas in cross-disciplinary ways, leading to increased interest from a broad base of thinkers (Vandermeij, 2013). Musk is not in the business of merely making a fortune, but in the movement of making an impressive yet sustainable difference for the earth and its inhabitants. He has thus far translated this passion in Tesla, SpaceX, and SolarCity, and possibly also the Hyperloop, all focused on a better quality of life on (or off) mother earth.

### **Right Intention**

Right intention is also designated as “right thinking,” and pertains to mental focus. Maintaining a right intention is not as easy as it may seem. Thich (1998) recommends four actions to refrain from losing right intention: 1) Ensuring proper understanding of what we see, read or hear, and contemplate on things first, since first impressions may be misleading; 2) Scrutinizing our actions in order to verify that we are not mindlessly exerting adopted habits, but engage in well-considered behavior; 3) Inspecting our habits, and acknowledging that we have good and bad ones. Knowing our bad habits can help us refrain from allowing them to emerge at times when we least need them, and 4) Nurturing an awakened mind in order to benefit others as much as possible. In Buddhism, this is referred to as “Bodhicitta.” When we engage in Bodhicitta, we become filled with the intention to do well onto others, and help them become happier beings.

With his long-term view on humanity’s and earth’s wellbeing, Elon Musk could be considered as a person with right intention as well. In this section, however, another business leader will be highlighted: Muhammad Yunus. Yunus is thus far the only business person who received the Nobel Peace Prize (in 2006). This prestigious award was granted to Yunus (and his brainchild, the Grameen Bank) because of his initiatives and decades of banking for the poor, and developing a microcredit system that was later adopted by many organizations in many nations. An economics professor by profession, Yunus returned to Bangladesh in the early 1970 after the country gained independence. He took on a position as economics professor at Chittagong University. On his daily walks through the streets in the village, he was shocked by the poverty he witnessed all around. He saw hard working people, who simply lacked the chance to get ahead in life, regardless of their actions. From his interactions with them, Yunus learned that these people were trapped in the clutches of money-lenders, who determined how much they wanted to pay for the products the poor people produced. This way, their poverty was sealed, while the money lenders had a guaranteed and abundant income flow. Deeply contemplating on his impressions, Yunus decided to organize a research project with his economics students, in order to find out how much money the poor people in the nearby village owed to the money lender. The amount was a little more than \$27.00 (twenty-seven dollars). Yunus then visited the local bank, where he learned that poor people could not get loans, because the general perception existed (and still exists) that poor people are not creditworthy, as they don’t pay back their loans. Yunus decided to loan the poor people the money out of his own pocket, and found that, contrary to what the banks assumed, he received 100% of the loan amount back. Unfortunately, the local banks were unwilling to surrender their viewpoint and give the poor people a chance, regardless of the data Yunus presented.

Fascinated by the debilitating state of being stuck in an obsolete paradigm, and filled with a desire to change the quality of the lives of the poor people by liberating them from the clutches of the money lenders, Yunus founded Grameen Bank, which means, “Bank of the Village.” In



1983, Grameen Bank received authorization to perform as an independent bank, and Yunus could start realizing his dream of reducing, and possibly one day even eradicating poverty in Bangladesh. Grameen Bank offered collateral-free, income-generating housing, student, and microenterprise loans to poor families (Vlock, 2009). At first, Grameen bank would loan money with a heavy emphasis on men (98%), with only 2% of female lenders. Yet, Yunus quickly found out that women were more serious in utilizing the money toward actual progress for their families, and were prompter in paying back their loans. This led the bank to prioritize loans to women, leading to a current base of 98% female lenders (Esty, 2011). Woman who wanted a loan, needed to have the support of a team of others, who would become co-responsible for repaying the money. “Over the years, [Yunus’] Grameen Bank, now operating in more than 100 countries, has loaned nearly \$7 billion in small sums to more than 7 million borrowers-97 percent of them women. Ninety-eight percent of the loans have been repaid” (*The World’s Top 20 Public Intellectuals*, 2008, p. 55).

In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Yunus pointed out that poverty is a threat to peace. He shared the grim reality that 96% of the world’s income goes to 40% of the global population, while 60% of the people have to share only 4% of income among each other. Poverty is the absence of all human rights. If we want to build stable peace, we have to create means for the poor to rise above their deprived state (*The World’s Top 20 Public Intellectuals*, 2008).

While the Bangladeshi political leaders ousted him from Grameen Bank in 2010, and several sources question the rules at Grameen, where loans are never forgiven but only restructured (e.g. Adams & Raymond, 2008), Yunus has made a major contribution to improvement of the position of the poor in many nations through his micro credit system. He is a globally revered person who compelled friend and foe to take another look at a paradigm that we collectively nurtured for decades if not centuries, and has demonstrated that poverty, being a human-made problem, can be eradicated if we want to.

### **Right Speech**

These times of massive and divergent communication avenues have brought the importance of right speech more to the forefront than ever before. Words are critical vehicles of information sharing, and they can be either constructive or destructive. Engaging in right speech entails deliberate refraining from saying things that negatively affect others. It further entails practicing mindfulness when sharing information that has not been verified and could be harmful to other parties. Engaging in right speech also involves efforts to resolve division and disharmony, and attempts to promote or restore unison and harmony. Right speech means telling the truth to the best of one’s abilities, not creating divisiveness by telling different people different things, refraining from making cruel statements, and refraining from overstatements (Thich, 1998). A great way of fostering right speech is listening, because listening enables us to seriously internalize and evaluate others’ words and intentions before responding. This may clarify how right view and right intention are embedded into right speech. It may also clarify that leaders such as Elon Musk and Muhammad Yunus, who both embarked on business ventures that aim to bring improvement to entire societies, may be very well able to practice right speech if they focus on doing so.

An interesting example of a leader who practices right speech is Binta Niambi Brown, who is CEO and cofounder of Fermata Entertainment Ltd. and a partner in the corporate practice of the New York office of Kirkland & Ellis LLP. Ms. Brown is also a prolific fundraiser, funding

political, humanitarian, and cultural initiatives through her extensive network (Binta Niambi Brown, N/A). Early on in her career, Brown was confronted with the dilemma of telling the truth and potentially losing a lucrative contract, or keeping the truth hidden the deal was sealed. She chose to practice right speech by telling the client of a \$3 billion asset acquisition what she knew, thus risking a major financial setback for herself and her business partner. She was well-aware that telling the truth at such a critical moment so early in her career, could ruin the deal and be disastrous for her future professional path. She understood well that she was risking major reputation loss amongst colleagues. However, she decided that she could rather live with that than with concealing the truth to her client. Ultimately, the deal went through, and Brown learned an important lesson that paved the path of her business behavior from there on: honesty is the best strategy (Giang, 2015).

There is more to Brown's behavior than mere right speech. Brown's career choice and performance demonstrates the interconnectedness between various treads of the Eightfold Path. She began dreaming of being a lawyer when she was merely ten years old, after hearing a congressman telling her class that he knew he wanted to be a politician when he was their age. Upon contemplating on the improved position her family enjoyed due to the civil rights movement, she decided that law was the way for her to contribute further to righteous causes. She realized that being a lawyer would enable her to make a positive difference for large groups in the future. Soon after becoming a law firm associate she realized the poignant lack of women of color in her position, and decided to become a fundraiser for political causes, arts organizations and her alma mater, Barnard College (Potkewitz, 2011). Brown's determination drove her forth to become one of the top young black fundraisers in the US. She became highly involved in Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign and was elected a trustee of Barnard College at age 34 (Potkewitz, 2011). In Brown's above-described actions, we can detect the three treads of the Noble Eightfold Path discussed so far: right views, right intentions, and right speech, as well as the ones to be discussed hereafter: right actions, right livelihood, right efforts, right concentration, and right mindfulness.

### **Right Action**

Right action starts, interestingly enough, with the discontinuation of an action: the action of harming ourselves and others (Thich, 1998). The context of right action is a very broad one, as it entails carefully guarding our practices, helping to protect life, and the wellbeing of all living beings, in the broadest sense possible. This also means no killing, no stealing, and not engaging in any type of misconduct. Because temptation is all around us, it is not as easy as it may seem to engage in right action. Killing, for instance, is a very broad topic. It also entails, for instance, refraining from killing for pleasure (hunting). Right action is in high need in our times, where wrong actions have led to global warming, and the loss and destruction of many innocent lives in the environment, due to our inconsiderate, selfish behavior. While the human community has progressed in many ways, its progress has happened at the expense of many other beings: the imbalance in income is greater than ever, which means that some pay for the prosperity of others. Human beings and animals in many parts of the world are victimized on a daily basis by those who allow themselves to be driven by mindless, selfish actions. The unbridled destruction of natural resources in our few global rainforests without proper replenishment, for instance, has demanded its toll, and since we are not living on an island, we will all ultimately feel the negative effects of these mindless actions.

While the leaders discussed earlier all engaged in right action, there is one leader that specifically focused on trying to diminish and potentially discontinue the action of harming as soon as he became aware of it: Ray Anderson. Ray Anderson was the founder and CEO of Interface, the world's largest carpet tile company. From the early 1970s, when he founded the company, to the early 1990s, Anderson was a CEO as many others: focusing on profit maximization and unconcerned about the massive destruction his company's activities caused to the environment. While he was in compliance with legal prescriptions, he did little more to ensure a sustainable approach to the ecosystem. However, in 1994, he was approached by a team in his organization that was attempting to answer questions asked by clients. The questions pertained to the company's environmental vision, which, at that time, was non-existent. Anderson soon became intrigued by the topic of sustainable performance and came to the astounding realization that he, along with many other corporate leaders, had lived the life of a plunderer, yet had never been punished for doing so. He started reading books that increased his awareness on the topic, and the more he read, the more his intention changed toward right action. Anderson subsequently embarked on mission to make carpets sustainably, an act that took immense effort and creativity to transform from impossible to achievable, because carpet production is by default highly destructive to the environment (Langer, 2011). Anderson's efforts to engage in right action transcended the walls of interface: he gave presentations, wrote books and articles, and talked to suppliers and fellow CEOs about the sustainability movement that was way overdue (Langer, 2011). He got encouraged to do all this after reading that the same source that caused the destruction through a "take-make-waste" approach (business), could also be the initiator of a restoration of the crisis in the biosphere (Anderson, 2007). As the years and the efforts accumulated, Interface gradually moved from using less than 1 percent to 49 percent in the use of recycled and renewable sources (Davis, 2014). Up till the year he died, 2011, Anderson worked on transforming himself into the greenest chief executive in America, and received numerous awards for being a model environmentally-conscious leader (*Interface's Ray Anderson...*, 2011).

### **Right Livelihood**

Right livelihood pertains to the ways people earn their living. It predominantly focuses on the nature of the work one does, and whether this is constructive or not. Thich (1998) suggests some of the critical questions one could reflect on to ensure right livelihood, such as, a) whether one is producing, dealing in, or promoting weapons of any kind that are being used to kill and destroy; b) whether one is engaging in practices where people are blatantly being taken advantage of, or c) whether one is involved in the production and/or promotion of destructive products such as alcohol and drugs.

An underrated role-model for practicing right livelihood is Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity. After studying economics and law, Fuller transformed himself into a self-made millionaire before he was thirty years old. Yet, he was never home, and spent very little time with his wife and children (*Millard Fuller...*, N/A). When, however, his wife demanded a divorce, Fuller regained his sight on what he really considered to be important in life, and that was not mere wealth but rather, happiness. He promptly donated all his money to charitable organizations, and devoted the rest of his life to being closer to his family. When Fuller and his family visited a friend in Georgia, they became attracted by the idea to build homes for the poor, and Habitat for Humanity was born. Along with his team, Fuller built more than 300,000 homes for about 1.5 million people worldwide. In the early 2000's he experienced some challenging times with the board of Habitat for Humanity, which eventually led to his departure

from the organization. However, Fuller was not one to stay down very long: he founded the Fuller Center for Housing, and continued to build homes for the poor until he passed away in 2009.

Engaging in right livelihood may not have made Fuller a billionaire, but he did not live in poverty either, and most importantly, he was revered and respected by many worldwide. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the US' highest civilian honor, and received numerous other forms of international recognition among which more than 50 honorary doctorates (*Fuller, Millard Dean, 2009*).

### **Right Effort**

Right effort is sometimes also listed as “right diligence.” While effort is generally an admirable practice, it can be directed to constructive or destructive activities. People who work in industries that produce items for destruction undeniably invest effort in their job. Unfortunately, this cannot be considered right effort, due to the suffering it causes. Right effort, like all other treads of the eightfold path, requires careful evaluation of our actions, thoughts, and intentions, in order to assess whether they are constructive. Similar to the other elements of the path, right effort is very personal in nature as well. It should be applied as a way of contemplating on the roots of our suffering, and subsequently engaging in the effort to release those roots.

Dr. Vandana Shiva has engaged in right effort since the 1970s, voicing the voiceless in regards to environmental sustainability and human wellness. As a scholar, Shiva takes a critical stance against bio-prospecting efforts undertaken by Western corporations among indigenous communities, and advocates social activism to protect communities from exploitation (Orozco & Poonamallee, 2014). Dr. Shiva has clear viewpoints on the major problems of today's world. She links poverty to the current worldview, which condones a vicious cycle by supporting technologies to compensate for scarcity, environmental destruction, ecosystems disruption, and human poverty, created by those very technologies (Reason, 2014).

Vandana Shiva received the first signs of her purpose when she became involved with Chipko, a grassroots movement initiated by predominantly women to enhance awareness about the illegal, massive felling of trees in the Himalayan area, causing vast ecological destruction. Through her involvement in this program, Shiva became aware of the importance of natural resources, the environment and ecology to the poor. Over the past decades, she learned about governments colluding with big businesses in the depletion of resources; about irresponsible and unsustainable trends in agribusiness, and about free trade treaties that supported the monopolization of the global food production through new technologies, making them unavailable to small farmers. The awareness of these mendacious global developments sparked Dr. Shiva's fighting spirit, urging her to found “Navdanya” (meaning, “nine seeds”) to cultivate seeds and promote biodiversity (Manikutty, 2006). Dr. Shiva affirms, “I believe there is a way in which we can move forward and I try to move in that direction” (Manikutty, 2006, p. 92). Being one of the leaders of the International Forum on Globalization, Shiva asserts that the problems we are currently facing with globalization are not due to integration, since this has been happening for a long time and will continue to do so, but are due to the terms that have been defined for integration. These terms were delineated by global corporations (Manikutty, 2006). Shiva continues,

*What has seriously gone wrong with globalization is the illusion about a global village. The reality is of a global supermarket – run on a Walmart model. Walmart is excellent in maximizing its profit margins, gets cheapest production from wherever it can get, cheapest sales in its retail systems, highest level of monopolizing through economies of scale, and is able to then rip off the workers and the original producers* (Manikutty, p. 94).

Dr. Vandana Shiva continues to lead crusades, partake in forums, write and speak out about the predatory manipulation of globalization, and specifically, the use of genetically modified crops, which are considered by many to be a major menace to human health and the livelihood of agrarian peoples worldwide (Specter, 2014).

### **Right Mindfulness**

In practicing mindfulness, we also practice all other facets of the eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right concentration. When we are mindful, we see things that we usually take for granted: the grass, the trees, our partners, our colleagues, our pets, and we realize fully that they are here now. It is our mindfulness that can guide us toward truly appreciating what we see, and displaying our gratitude for their presence. Through our mindfulness, we may instigate the mindfulness of others. The appreciation that is part of mindfulness can alleviate the suffering of mindlessness, and encourage us to go a step further, so that we concentrate on others, understand them better, and transform our own suffering and theirs into joy (Thich, 1998).

Mindfulness can be enhanced through various techniques. While currently a practice that is highly esteemed, mindfulness techniques were perceived as predominantly Buddhist or otherwise eastern-based up till the 1960s. The 1970s, however, brought an insightful wave to the Western world, and mindfulness meditation as well as other techniques have since earned respect and are currently even used as a therapy form (Adriansen & Krohn, 2016). Mindfulness can be provoked in several ways. A frequently practiced way is meditation. One of the most well-known forms of meditation is Vipassana, or insight meditation, which is the meditation practice in which Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as the Buddha, engaged when he gained enlightenment. Vipassana has emerged into a global movement, and is even more westernized than, for instance, Zen, because it does not require traditional techniques. Because it can be practiced in a non-sectarian way, Vipassana meditation is attractive to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike (Marques, 2008).

A leader who has displayed mindfulness in multiple facets is Howard Schultz, CEO of the Starbucks Corporation. As a businessman, Schultz managed to remain mindful of the bigger picture, and repeatedly made decisions that were not necessarily in line with a die-hard bottom-line focus. He returned as CEO to the company in 2008 after a multi-year hiatus, because he was concerned of the excessive profit focus that threatened to alienate Starbucks from its core activities. Growth had become an end onto itself rather than a means to an end. The Starbucks Corporation had turned into a performance machine, where the value of stocks on Wall Street mattered more than the human experience: customers' opinions were no longer important, and neither was the selection of store locations (Hess, 2010). To Schultz, this development was in stark contrast to his frequently iterated notion of “provid[ing] human connection and personal enrichment in cherished moments, around the world, one cup at a time” (Schultz & Jones Yang, 1997, p. 266).

Upon his return as the Starbucks chief, Schultz closed about 900 underperforming stores (Saporito, 2012), and only opened new stores in areas where there was room for responsible growth. Schultz has learned valuable lessons from past mistakes and uses these experiences to the company's advantage from here onward. For instance, when Starbucks was starting to offer breakfast, the aroma of fried eggs was overpowering the well-known Starbucks coffee aroma, alienating many of the coffee-desiring customers. As a result, Schultz has become more cautious in introducing new beverages and other products to its line of service. In international performance, Schultz also puts his experience to work: no longer does he try to impose Starbucks products to new markets. Instead, he adapts to local desires and cultural directions. Gradually, this has led to an increasingly coffee-loving population in tea-admiring nations such as Beijing and Bangkok (Lin, 2012).

What makes Schultz a good role model for mindful leadership, however, is his sense of responsibility beyond the coffee business. Starbucks' employees, about 160,000 worldwide, are considered "partners" even if they work part-time. Unlike most major employers, Starbucks' part-timers receive reasonable pay, full health insurance benefits, and stock awards (Goetz & Shrestha, 2009), a result of Schultz personal life experience at an early age, when his father was laid off as a part-timer without health insurance after an accident. Schultz has now also instated college reimbursement programs for employees who work at least 20 hours per week. To that end, he has established partnerships with several US Universities. He understands that a college education may lead to a departure of these employees in the long run, but his aim is to contribute to expanded future options for these employees (Choi, 2014). Schultz has also been instrumental in assisting with the unemployment problems right after the great recession. Under his guidance, the Starbucks foundation has been supporting a campaign called "Create Jobs for USA," which focuses on funding job development in deprived areas (Saporito, 2012). In addition, the Starbucks Corporation has made strides in its listing as a Fair Trade (FT) corporation, thus helping to amplify awareness about this movement, and Schultz has expressed great support for employing differently abled citizens (Marques, Camillo & Holt, 2014). On his many travels in and outside of the US, Schultz talks and listens to many people, and engages in initiatives that speak clearly of his will to make a positive difference in other's lives. He has been known to help disabled veterans, whom he met on his visits, to find a purpose in life again. He personally assisted in the rebuilding of homes in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Howard Schultz and his wife founded the Schultz Family Foundation, through which many of his social endeavors are sponsored, primarily focusing on rehabilitating veterans in the US economy and assisting young people with low chances in finding work (Anders, 2016).

### **Right Concentration**

Right concentration is firmly intertwined with the other elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. Through right concentration we can focus on what really matters. Where mindfulness attentively observes all that emerges, concentration has a special focus on one object at a time (Nouri, 2013). Right Concentration is oftentimes also referred to as Right Meditation. Right mindfulness and concentration are both tools to sharpen the mind (Nouri, 2013), and can both be amplified through mindfulness meditation, also known as Vipassana. Concentration is required to be present wherever we are. Once we can attain that, we enjoy each moment to the fullest, and cease our excessive concerns about the past or the future. Through right concentration we can discover beautiful scenes and occurrences that used to escape our attention when we were not focused. Right concentration can therefore lead us to

greater happiness, since we are more focused on what matters now. If we engage deep enough in right concentration, we will ultimately start realizing the impermanent nature of many of our cravings, and learn to release them (Thich, 1998).

Identifying a leader to model right concentration might not be impossible, but might be slightly more complicated, due to the specific focus in concentration. At the same time, however, it should be understood that the leaders presented as examples in the seven previously mentioned elements of the path, could be placed interchangeably, because each element of the path is interwoven into the others. Elon Musk would also be a good representative of right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, or right concentration. Muhammad Yunus could easily be placed within the scopes of right view, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, or right concentration. The same goes for each of the other leaders.

Yet, in slight deviation of the scholarly trend, the exemplary leader to be projected at this point is the reader. Assuming that every person is a leader in his or her own right, and that anyone reading this article is interested enough in making a positive difference toward a better future, there could not be a better role model selected. The only point of caution may be that it is imperative to critically examine one's motives before any action, because the same interrelated cycle counts for both constructive and destructive views, intentions, speech, actions, livelihood, efforts, mindfulness and concentration.

## **A Mindful Moral Compass for Twenty-First Century Leadership**

The conclusive section of this article consists of an urgent request to scholars and practitioners who understand the importance of a primarily sustainability and life-cherishing oriented leadership style toward the future. With the twentieth century firmly behind us, the time has arrived to shift our paradigms from growth prioritization to a focus on cultivation of life-sustaining resources. Profits are an important strategy for corporate evolution, but in our day and age another evolution requires more attention: the evolution of life and therewith, the safeguarding and restoration of critical resources, along with a focus on initiatives and actions that promote a better quality of life for all occupants of planet earth. Leaders who withstand the temptation of short term returns, and who dare to engage in activities that aim to achieve a better quality of life for all will experience greater support, witness more growth, and find more gratification in their practices than those who continue to cling to an obsolete paradigm.

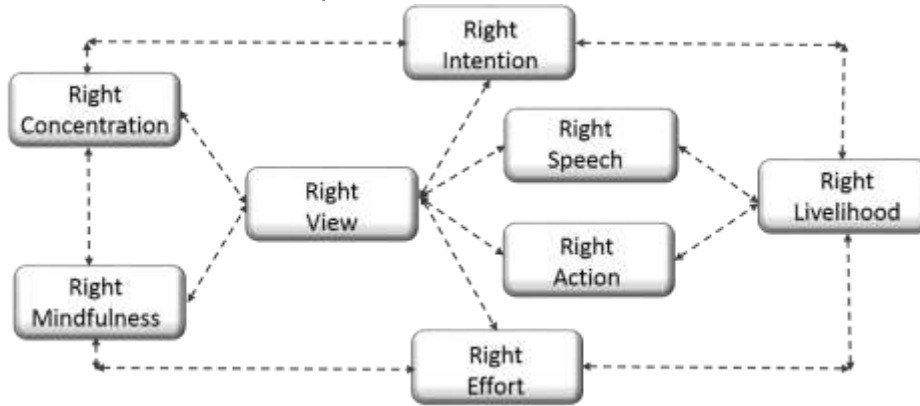
### ***Improving Leadership through the Noble Eightfold Path***

Through profiling seven leaders who engaged in multiple elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, this article attempted to illustrate that it is possible to be successful in our times by thinking, acting, and reflecting in the right way. Musk, Yunus, Brown, Anderson, Fuller, Shiva, and Schultz undoubtedly have their human weaknesses, but the major input they displayed on a global forum has been one that alluded to great awareness of collective wellness. In several cases, it took some time before these leaders landed on the path toward massive compassion-awareness, but the ultimate result was worth all prior sidetracks.

A critical point to underscore once again here is the fact that the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path are interrelated and inspire one another. An interpretation of implementing the Noble Eightfold Path could thus be as follows: a leader who engages in (morally) right *view* will *mindfully concentrate* on decisions that are based on improvement of the quality of life for all



stakeholders. Consequently, all *intention*, communication (*speech*), *effort*, and *actions* of this leader will be geared toward the goal of behaving morally sound. With such a mindful approach from initial views to ultimate actions, the leader becomes aware of the need to engage in right *livelihood*, as (s)he consistently gauges his or her accomplishments to the high moral standards developed.



**Figure 1: The Noble Eightfold Path as a Mindful Moral Compass for Leaders**

While some may think that the ancient eightfold path is too idealistic for contemporary leadership practices, there are hopefully enough who may start utilizing this path as a mindful moral compass in their decision-making and directional processes. The fact that the elements of this path are interrelated makes its implementation easier than initially estimated. The leaders presented in this article are exemplary of that. While they have not been spared from setbacks and disappointments on their leadership journey, their overall accomplishments are widely praised, and their ideas and actions applauded.



**Figure 2: The Noble Eightfold Path as a Mindful Moral Compass for Leaders**

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